

## Bilirakis Introduces Legislation to Improve Services for Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury

WASHINGTON, DC (September 22, 2010) – Rep. Tim Walz (MN-01), Rep. Gus Bilirakis (FL-09), Rep. Jeff Miller (FL-01) and Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr. (NJ-08) have introduced bipartisan legislation to improve rehabilitation services for veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Because of ambiguities in current law, TBI treatment at the Department of Veterans Affairs narrowly focuses TBI care on physical restoration. HR 6123, the Veterans’ Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitative Services’ Improvements Act of 2010 would clarify the definition of rehabilitation so veterans will receive care that adequately addresses their physical and mental health needs, as well as quality of life and prospects for long-term recovery and success.

“Our wounded warriors deserve the best care and support we can give them,” said Rep. Tim Walz, who is a 24 year veteran of the Army National Guard. “When a veteran suffering from TBI comes to the VA for treatment, they need to be presented with a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation that will allow them to recover function, achieve independence and fully integrate back into their communities. This bill ensures we provide comprehensive care instead of just physical rehabilitation, which is what is presently available to our injured veterans.”

Because of advances in medicine, service members who would not have been expected to survive catastrophic attacks in previous conflicts are returning home today from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan with unprecedented severe and complex injuries. Since 2001, over 1,500 service members have suffered from a severe TBI, many of whom require rehabilitative programs ranging from total care for the most basic needs to semi-independent living support. A restrictive approach to rehabilitation puts these wounded warriors at risk of losing any progress they made towards recovery.

“Our wounded warriors have made tremendous sacrifices in order to keep this country safe, and it’s our responsibility to help them wherever we have the ability to do so,” said Rep. Gus Bilirakis, a member of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. “Providing our veterans and service members with the benefits they deserve is the least we can do to repay them for their service. With nearly 2 million veterans calling Florida home, I am honored to introduce this bill to help expand the services we provide for those with a TBI.”

“This bill is just one more important step we can take toward fully addressing Traumatic Brain Injuries for our returning service members. Ensuring full rehabilitation for these veterans will provide the continuum of care that they have earned,” said Rep. Jeff Miller.

“Soldiers who fight in combat for the United States of America are willing to give everything they have for their country. We owe them nothing less than everything we have to restore a soldier’s abilities and quality of life as much as possible after a traumatic brain injury, the signature wound of our ongoing conflicts. As the co-chair of the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, I have met enough wounded veterans to know that recovering from a TBI is not a simple clinical matter of bandages and wound care. We must commit to offering our service members the holistic treatment they need for all seen and unseen effects of an injury. This is exactly what this legislation seeks to provide and I am proud to work with Congressman Walz on this bill,” said Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr.

HR 6123 is endorsed by the Wounded Warrior Project and the Disabled American Veterans, Blinded Veterans Association, the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States.

“This important bipartisan legislation would close critical gaps in VA rehabilitation programs for warriors who have suffered traumatic brain injury,” said Steve Nardizzi, Executive Director for Wounded Warrior Project. “These complex injuries often require long-term rehabilitative care. The legislation would help ensure that rehabilitation is not prematurely cut off and that these veterans get the support they need — whether those are health-services or non-medical assistance -- to achieve maximum independence and quality of life.”

The Veterans’ Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitative Services Improvements Act of 2010 would ensure wounded warriors suffering from TBI receive a more comprehensive and holistic rehabilitation plan that focuses on physical restoration, mental health, independence, and quality of life. It would also help veterans in maintaining the gains they have made during initial phases of treatment by requiring the Department of Veterans’ Affairs to develop rehabilitation plans that stress improved physical, cognitive and vocational functioning in the long term.